

We all know that Jesus was a great teacher. But we also know that his teaching was often misunderstood. The thing that he talked about most often, and the thing that he demonstrated by his miracles, was the kingdom of God. But it was probably the thing that the people around him – even his disciples – had most difficulty understanding. Many of them thought of the kingdom in political or geographical terms. He challenged them on many occasions, telling them to open their eyes and their ears. The kingdom was all around them, but they were blind to it; they couldn't perceive it. In order to help them see, he gave them images in parables. Parables didn't necessarily give them a straightforward answer. Rather, the parables were meant to spark their imagination so that they might perceive things differently.

We heard two of those parables today. The first calls on a simple image that they would have all been familiar with. It was the image of a farmer spreading seed on the ground. Jesus points out that the seed will eventually produce a harvest without much work by the farmer. Yes, he probably has to make sure the conditions are right, but the real work is happening inside the seed. It goes through the natural processes of germinating, sprouting, following the sun and growing into a crop that can be harvested. And Jesus says the kingdom of God is like this. It is the exact opposite of what many of them understood by the coming of a kingdom. They imagined the kingdom coming about by a show of force that would overthrow an enemy and instal a new king. But the parable is saying something different. The kingdom is God's almost imperceptible work in the world. The kingdom isn't about a place; it is about the work of God. God is at work in the world, transforming the world so that it might have the fulness of life.

The parable, of course, was not meant just for those listening to Jesus. It is also meant for us, and it can teach us. I think the main lesson is that God is at work in our lives, even if we don't always recognise it. I am sure that we all desire to grow in our faith, and we often ask what we have to do to grow in faith. The parable reminds us that God gives the growth, and that God is always leading us to grow more deeply in our love for him and our commitment to him. Yes, we need to be open to the grace of God, but we don't make it happen. God is ever gracious and generous. Just like the farmer who rejoices at the harvest, we too can rejoice and give thanks to God for what he has done and continues to do in our lives.

The second parable is also drawn from the image of a seed. But this time it is the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds. And that is the point. From this tiny, tiny seed, the biggest bush of all will grow. When it grows, it will have a large canopy that will be a place for the birds to nest. And the canopy will also provide shade to shelter the animals on the ground from the heat. If you didn't know much about horticulture, you would probably throw away such a small seed. That too is another point Jesus is making about the kingdom. It is the weakest and most vulnerable ones who often welcome the kingdom with generosity.

Once again, this parable can speak to us, and I think there are a few lessons in it. The first is that we should never think of ourselves as insignificant or think that our faith is weak and insufficient. No matter how small we think our faith is, God is at work in our lives, drawing us into his divine life. And there is a second point we can take from the parable. The kingdom is not something that we cling to in a possessive way. Rather it is something that leads us to focus on others. Just as the tree provided a place for the birds and shelter for those on the ground, so our faith makes us other-focused – no matter how small or weak we might think our faith is. More than that, we are part of a community of faith which itself becomes God's kingdom in the world. Whether that community is a large group of people who worship together each Sunday, or whether it is a small family, it becomes the vehicle through which God slowly and imperceptibly transforms lives so that the world might become the place of justice and love that God created it to be.

The parables we heard today are meant to encourage us in our faith. Let us take courage and not only welcome the kingdom but also show the world what is possible when God's kingdom brings new life.